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**JONAS SAVIMBI AND UNITA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE
AN APPLICATION OF MAO'S THEORY OF WARFARE?**

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JONAS SAVIMBI AND UNITA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE AN APPLICATION OF MAO'S THEORY OF WARFARE?

Since biblical times man has sought an answer to the dilemma of how those who are weak can conquer those who are powerful. Mao Tse-tung's success over both a foreign invader, Japan, and a domestic foe, Chiang Kai-Shek and the Nationalist Chinese, popularized and seemed to validate his theories on how to accomplish the above. One of the many devotees of Mao was an Angolan intellectual, Jonas Savimbi, who was determined to liberate his country from Portuguese colonial rule.

Savimbi and the party he created, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), played a role in helping drive the Portuguese out of Angola, but lost the ensuing civil war for control of the nation to the Soviet and Cuban-backed MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola). Savimbi then led his followers on an Angolan version of Mao's Long March and began a new struggle to liberate Angola, this time from the clutches of communism and foreign (Soviet and Cuban) domination. For the next sixteen years, from 1976 to 1992, Savimbi carried out a protracted war against the MPLA government and seemed close to victory at several junctures. However, UNITA was never able to subdue its opponent militarily. UNITA did amass sufficient power to force the MPLA into negotiations but once again lost its bid for control of Angola in elections held in 1992. Savimbi refused to accept the election results and resumed the armed struggle.

Using the key elements of Mao's theory, this paper will examine Savimbi's application of that theory and attempt to address the question of whether UNITA's failure to achieve control in Angola resulted from faulty application of the theory

MAO'S THEORY OF WARFARE

Mao's theory grew out of his search for a way to bring his party, the Chinese communists, to power. The key elements of his theory flow from Mao's vision of the state he wanted to create. They are: 1) the inseparability of the political and the military; 2) the fusion of the army and the people, and 3) the use of protracted war to erode support for the existing system and eventually bring about its disintegration. In addition, Mao stressed the importance of continually studying and correctly assessing the situation to ensure that the appropriate step was taken.¹

Mao's emphasis on the primacy of political objectives went far beyond that of previous strategists by actively involving the military in political work. The army was an arm of the Party and carrying out political indoctrination was as important a mission for the military as fighting. The second key element, the "unity of the army and the people", is the purpose for which the military engages in political work. Mao recognized that to fight an army of superior force, he would need the support of the people, for they were to be the source of food, shelter, supplies and sanctuary for his forces. Sustained support could not be coerced; it had to be voluntary. Hence the need for individual soldiers to

¹ Rejai, *Mao Tse-tung on Revolution and War*, p. 178

understand why they were fighting and be prepared to solicit the people's support. The military's goals had to become the people's goals and vice versa.

The third and most emulated element is Mao's theory of protracted war which encompasses three stages: 1) the strategic defense during which the revolutionary forces are weak and primarily concerned with protecting themselves; 2) the strategic stalemate during which the revolution grows and the enemy weakens; and 3) the strategic counteroffensive during which the revolution attains decisive superiority over the opponent. Mobile warfare dominates the first stage, guerrilla warfare the second stage, and traditional positional warfare supplemented by both guerrilla and mobile warfare characterizes the third stage. To successfully carry out a protracted war, the revolutionary must also establish proper bases. Mao identified three kinds of areas, which can be summarized as: 1) guerrilla base areas - regions controlled militarily, geographically, politically and economically by the guerrillas; 2) enemy areas - regions controlled in similar fashion by the opponent; and 3) contested areas, or regions in which neither the guerrillas nor the opponents predominate. Mao wrote that the essence of the guerrilla's strategy must be to expand the first and third type of areas and reduce the second.²

SAVIMBI AND UNITA: ORIGINS TO 1976

Savimbi studied the revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba and elsewhere, while he was a university student but was most impressed with Mao's writings and decided to follow the Maoist model for warfare. It is not clear that Savimbi engaged in a serious

² Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Military Writings*, pp. 210-215

study of the conditions in Angola, vice conditions in pre-Communist China, but he evidently saw similarities for he believed that the revolution in Angola, like China, had to develop first among the peasantry and in rural areas. He also recognized differences, for he believed that religious and tribal traditions (especially land and cattle ownership) in Angola were deeply rooted and that no movement could succeed which did not respect these traditions.³ When he established UNITA in 1964, Savimbi declared the party's goal to be independence from Portugal followed by elections in which the Angolan people would decide their own future. It is important to note that Savimbi did not specify what kind of state he envisioned, and that he did not rule out a socialist form of government.

In 1965 Savimbi and eleven recruits underwent guerrilla training in China, and in 1966, UNITA established a guerrilla base area within Angola, the first independence movement to do so.⁴ They chose an area near the Zambian border that met all the conditions Mao had outlined - it was isolated from Portuguese control, the terrain was forested hills which provided good cover, and the area was self-sufficient in hunting and fishing. The local populace comprised a diverse group of minority tribes who felt exploited by the Portuguese regime and were favorably inclined to Savimbi's vague and idealistic descriptions of a democratic Angola. Political tracts issued by UNITA highlighted the party's diverse appeal and the fact that its members were living among and fighting for ordinary people. Savimbi followed Mao's formula for garnering public support. He held regular party Congresses, spoke frequently to village gatherings, and

³ Savimbi, *The War Against Soviet Colonialism*, from *Policy Review* p. 19.

⁴ Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* pp. 66-68. The majority of information in this paper on Savimbi and UNITA comes from Bridgland's biography of Savimbi. Rather than use continuous citations I cite only those instances where Bridgland's precise words are used. This is in no way intended to deprive Bridgland of the credit due his work.

worked diligently to establish schools, hospitals and other facilities to increase support and demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the colonial regime. Military actions undertaken in the early years were generally confined to attacks on small Portuguese outposts or sabotage of the Benguela railroad,⁵ symbols of Portuguese rule and exploitation, and realistic targets for a movement in the first stage of a protracted war. By the early 70's Savimbi had consolidated a party stronghold in southeastern Angola, and amassed a guerrilla force of several thousand which had carried out numerous successful raids. Judged by Mao's standards, UNITA was on the right path.

Ironically, UNITA's fortunes changed at about the same time as Portugal's announcement in 1974 that it would grant independence to Angola in November 1975. Revelations that Savimbi had provided information on rival independence movements to Portuguese intelligence were published in early 1974 and caused UNITA to be blacklisted by a long list of nations.⁶ Smoldering conflicts among the three independence movements, the MPLA, the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), and UNITA flared into full-scale war in the months preceding independence. The communist MPLA won substantial support from the Soviet Union and Cuba. The FNLA received help from China and several African nations. Responding to the MPLA and FNLA buildups, Savimbi doomed his organization by soliciting and accepting aid from South Africa.

If cooperation with the colonial government was reprehensible it could at least be understood. Cooperation with apartheid South Africa was heresy and could not be

⁵ Ibid, p 73

⁶ Heywood, *Unita and Ethnic Nationalism in Angola*, p 49

forgiven. In both instances Savimbi ignored Mao's fundamental principle of accurately assessing the situation. Worse perhaps, Savimbi allowed military calculations to override political assessments and thus undermined his own political goals. An American CIA officer captured the impact of the deal with South Africa precisely: "The propaganda and political war was lost in that stroke. There was nothing [we] could invent that would be as damaging to the other side as [the] alliance with the hated South Africans was to [Savimbi's] cause."⁷

By early 1976 UNITA was on the ropes and in February Savimbi undertook his version of Mao's Long March with a group 1,000 dedicated followers. Fewer than 100 completed the 3,000 kilometer trek into the central highlands of Angola.

UNITA: THE SECOND COMING, 1977-1992

Following Mao's teachings, Savimbi soon rebuilt UNITA by repeating the successful steps he had followed in the early 1960's. Savimbi found a site that met Mao's criteria, Cueleir, an isolated village in the heart of Ovimbundu territory, which provided adequate protection from government forces and sufficient sources of food and other supplies. Still controlled by pro-UNITA forces, it was also an excellent base from which to renew grassroots political organizing. UNITA methodically rebuilt a following, but its efforts this time were directed primarily at members of Savimbi's native tribe, the Ovimbundu, who comprise 38-40% of Angola's population.⁸ UNITA's political goals were substantially unaltered. Savimbi called for independence from foreign

⁷ Bridgland, p. 143

⁸ Heywood, p. 56

(Soviet/Cuban) control and for elections to allow the Angolan people to decide their own future

On the political front, two factors during this period stand out. The first is that after ten years of fighting, Savimbi remained either unable or unwilling to articulate a clear vision of the kind of state he hoped to bring about. Beyond calling for elections, Savimbi never addressed the kind of government he believed Angola should have. This made it easy for his opponents to paint Savimbi as a stooge of the U.S. and South Africa, and increasingly difficult for sympathetic, but uncommitted Angolans to identify reasons for supporting UNITA. The second factor is the degree to which the Ovimbundu came to dominate UNITA. For many Ovimbundu, UNITA became a symbol of their tribe's aspirations, and accordingly, came to be seen by many other Angolans as a tribal party, rather than a national movement.⁹ Although Savimbi speeches consistently paint UNITA as a party open to diverse membership, I find little evidence that he took action to ensure that political indoctrination was carried out across a broad spectrum. As a result, UNITA seems to have had few non-Ovimbundu members who were able to persuade other non-Ovimbundus that UNITA represented their interests. This fact, combined with Savimbi's vagueness about the kind of government UNITA would institute, damaged the movement's ability to achieve the 'unity of the people and the army'.

On the military front, one finds similar and more troublesome gaps between Savimbi's rhetoric and UNITA's actions. From 1977 to 1992 Savimbi systematically pursued the three stages of protracted war. The first lasted from late 1976-1980. During

⁹ Ibid. pp. 56-57

this stage. Savimbi's stated military objective was to cripple the economy by blowing up bridges, stopping the railways, and conducting ambushes to make the roads unsafe for transport. In December 1976, Savimbi's forces ambushed a column of five trucks carrying MPLA soldiers and killed 30 of the government troops. The MPLA retaliated by attacking a pro-UNITA village, killing 40 peasants. To avenge this deed, UNITA in turn attacked a pro-MPLA village killing 51 MPLA soldiers and 30 civilians. In addition they destroyed all shops, churches and houses, making the area virtually uninhabitable. 26 survivors were taken away to live in a UNITA 'liberated area' ¹⁰ The deliberate killing of civilians, wanton destruction of villages and forced relocations became a pattern that was repeated endless times over the next ten years. By mid-1977 it also became UNITA policy to execute all captured MPLA officers. UNITA's actions clearly violated Mao's teachings and, while effective in the short-term, eroded support for UNITA over the long-term by causing it to be seen as little better than the admittedly repressive MPLA.

By 1979, Savimbi claimed UNITA was entering stage two of its protracted war. UNITA successfully established cells beyond its guerrilla bases and began a program "of sabotage in the main cities, including the capital, Luanda, where bombs were planted in the East German Embassy, the offices of Aeroflot, the Labor Ministry and a major railway terminal. UNITA blew up petroleum storage tanks in Lobito, in eastern Angola, and the airport control tower at Huambo" ¹¹ Savimbi put together a conventional army which succeeded in capturing the city of Mavinga in 1982, proving that UNITA could

¹⁰ Bridgland, pp. 239-240. The story of this attack was told to reporter Leon Dash by a UNITA guerrilla.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 277.

“not only take, but hold an exposed position in an area with heavy MPLA troop concentrations”¹² By the end of 1983 UNITA controlled most of southeastern Angola. From 1983-1986, UNITA engaged the MPLA in a series of battles but neither was able to maintain a decisive advantage. Both UNITA and the MPLA began to make extensive use of landmines during this period, further devastating the countryside and driving peasants either out of the country or into the cities. UNITA also engaged in repeated kidnappings and disruption of the diamond trade to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the government.¹³ In using landmines, Savimbi not only deviated from Mao’s teachings, but effectively attacked his own base. The mines made farming practically impossible, and deprived UNITA of thousands of potential supporters.

In a 1986 speech Savimbi declared that UNITA was in the third and final stage of the protracted war.¹⁴ But events on the ground belied this claim. In my estimation, the war never really moved beyond a stalemate. UNITA controlled one-third of Angolan territory in 1986 and though it expanded its reach somewhat by 1992, never was able to achieve a decisive victory. Similarly, the MPLA was never able to diminish significantly UNITA’s control. Negotiations begun in 1988 eventually led to elections being held in 1992. Savimbi ran as a candidate for President and won approximately 40% of the vote, the UNITA party won 37% of the vote in the national assembly ballot.¹⁵ Having fought for nearly 16 years to give Angolans the opportunity to choose their own leaders, Savimbi now rejected the people’s will and renewed the armed struggle.

¹² Harwood, *The Washington Post*

¹³ Ibid, pp 401-403

¹⁴ Savimbi, p 19

¹⁵ Pereira, *The Neglected Tragedy*, p 17

CONCLUSIONS

Although Savimbi claimed to be following Mao's model, he failed to consistently apply Mao's theory. As this paper has shown, both in soliciting the support of the people and in prosecuting a protracted war, he ignored key aspects of Mao's teaching. One explanation for Savimbi's failure may lie in the fact that Savimbi accepted Mao's framework but explicitly rejected the communist ideology which the theory was devised to promote, and never replaced it with an alternate ideology that might have guided his actions more clearly. By adhering to a vague philosophy of 'elections and respect for tribal and religious traditions', Savimbi allowed UNITA to be transformed into a predominantly tribal movement. In the final analysis, Savimbi seems to have failed to think through the means by which a democratic guerrilla movement in an ethnically conscious nation could successfully make use of a theory devised for a homogenous, communist movement. On the other hand, Savimbi's failure to accept the results of the 1992 election, widely viewed as free and fair, makes his actions all the more ironic, since they suggest that Savimbi, like Mao, may believe that the only acceptable government for Angola is one that he controls. We may find that despite deviating from Mao's theory, Savimbi is more of a 'Maoist' than anyone suspected.

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